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ABSTRACT

Currently, 30 California community colleges have adopted flexible calendars, which permit up to 15 of the 175 days of legally required faculty service to be used for authorized non-instructional activities. A broad range of flex activities are authorized under Title V of the State Education Code, including staff development or in-service training, curriculum or instructional material development, student personnel services, student advising, orientation, department meetings, institutional research, and matriculation services. Although scheduling options exist with flexible calendars, most colleges tend to schedule the flex days as an intersession in January. The implementation and management of flex calendars involves: (1) determining the ratio of mandatory and optional activities; (2) overcoming possible resistance from faculty, the district governing board, and the public; (3) developing a special set of policies and procedures to encourage faculty participation; (4) involving departments and divisions in planning and implementation; and (5) using evaluations to modify the next year's flex plan. While the flexible calendar provides time for curriculum improvement and staff development, the commitment to making change meaningful must come from the staff. (MDB)

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Management Report

1987-8/5

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO THE FLEXIBLE CALENDAR

by

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FOREWORD

In considering potential authors for this Management Report, I went directly to Bill Harlan as a knowledgeable resource on, and advocate for, the flexible calendar. His suggestion that he enlist Don Mahan as co-author was welcomed for the same reasons. As English faculty colleagues at Diablo Valley College for more than 20 years, they have had a continuing commitment to staff development and were quick to realize the opportunities for professional growth and improvement of instruction that the flexible calendar affords. Their collaborative efforts resulted in this Practical Guide to the Flexible Calendar. In it they briefly review the background leading to adoption of the calendar, explain its legal provisions, and clarify the various ways it may be utilized. They go on to point out some of the advantages of the flexible calendar, but they also address its potential problems, the management function, and the critical factors essential to ensuring its success.

Bill Harlan has an Associate degree from Monterey Peninsula College and Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts degrees from the University of California at Berkeley. He joined the English faculty at Diablo Valley College in 1964 and has served as Senate President there as well as President of the Contra Costa District United Faculty and President of the Faculty Association of California Community Colleges. In 1985 he assumed his current position as Director of the Center for Higher Education, a consortium made up of University of California, Berkeley Extension; California State University, Hayward; and Diablo Valley College. Bill has been active in calendar reform legislation, has worked on the flexible calendar bill, and has served as the Flexible Calendar Coordinator for his District.

Don Mahan holds a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Massachusetts, a Master of Arts in Teaching from Harvard, and a Ph.D. from U.C. Berkeley. An English faculty member at Diablo Valley College since 1963, he has also been a Division Chair, Associate Dean, and Faculty Association President. He served as Flexible Calendar Coordinator for three years and Staff Development Coordinator for two years, an assignment he still holds.

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A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO THE FLEXIBLE CALENDAR

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Back in 1976, a long-simmering dissatisfaction with the antiquated 175-day calendar for California's community colleges led to a modest reform effort called the flexible calendar pilot project. By allowing six selected colleges to experiment with replacing up to 15 days of regular instruction with authorized alternative activities, the State sought to address the most glaring problem with the traditional calendar -- its length. Since 1982, state law permits all community colleges to exercise this option. About 30 colleges have already adopted some form of the flex calendar, and another dozen are considering a change for the fall.

Many welcome the chance to move to a more rational school calendar. However, experience has shown that colleges which change simply to achieve fewer instructional days are often disappointed when the novelty wears off. The real benefit of the flexible calendar is the time and energy it provides for increasingly important activities like matriculation, staff development, and improvement of instruction which would otherwise be difficult to schedule and finance. Because the designated employees (both full-time and part-time) have a contractual obligation to participate, these revitalizing efforts may be treated with the same degree of institutional commitment that meeting classes, keeping office hours, and attending required meetings presume.

Shortening the Traditional Calendar

California community college students are required to attend school at least 15 days longer than any other college students in the country. While some may not see this as a disadvantage, the fact remains that California's calendar requirement is not a result of a rational policy decision for our students' benefit but merely an anachronism of the legal ties between community colleges and secondary schools. The 175-day requirement creates vexing problems for the diverse student population of the community colleges. Longer terms increase the the possibility of students withdrawing due to conflicts with work schedules and family obligations. Although students in community colleges on the quarter system have problems with the longer calendar, we will focus on the difficulties for those on the semester system, since more and more community colleges are adopting the semester format and since it is here that the problems are most apparent. Semester students usually complete their fall term in late January. The truncated post-Christmas session has always been of questionable instructional value. Because almost all four-year colleges now begin instruction in January, many students who seek to transfer at mid-year may well have to wait until the following term. The lack of a substantial break between fall and spring semesters leaves instructors with little time to prepare for new courses and imposes extra demands on student services. (In some cases, students on academic probation are not notified of dismissal until three weeks into the new term.) Perhaps the most negative aspect of the traditional

calendar, whether quarter or semester, is that it reinforces in the minds of our students the old perception of community colleges as extensions of high school.

Given the political climate in Sacramento, it seems unlikely that the legislature will ever decrease the number of required days without an acompanying cut in funding. Therefore the flexible calendar option, which retains the 175-day requirement for faculty service but allows up to 15 days for alternative activities, remains the only reform choice for the foreseeable future.

What the Law Provides

The flex calendar is administered according to the provisions of Title V, Chapter 8 and Article 8 of the Education Code. Local compliance is overseen by an official of the State Chancellor's office, and districts wishing to go on the flexible calendar apply to that office. The application calls for an assessment of the most critical needs for staff, student, and instructional improvement and an explanation of how the flex arrangement will meet those needs. (The college's accreditation report can be useful in providing information for this phase of the application process.) The planned calendar configuration and proposed activities must be somewhat detailed for approval.

The only required activity during the flex period is some instruction/evaluation. Because of the fiscal arrangements explained below, instruction may be minimal during the designated flex days. The range of alternative activities allowed under the law is very broad: staff development or in-service training; curriculum or learning resource development; student personnel services; learning resource services; related activities, such as student advising, orientation, departmental or division meetings, conferences and workshop, institutional research, and matriculation services; other duties assigned by the district; and necessary support activities for the above. The Chancellor's office has warned that any activities which appear to be purely recreational or unrelated to an employee's professional assignment may be questioned during an auditing review.

There is no financial risk in moving to a flexible calendar, since ADA is calculated as "if the time for improvement activities had not been permitted and scheduled instruction had instead taken place." The effect of this provision is to discourage any more than minimal instruction since there is no fiscal incentive. On the other hand, part-time faculty who teach term-length courses are encouraged to participate in alternative activities since the district will receive apportionment for them and they can be paid for their participation. The district must designate which of its employees will be involved in these activities and then enter into an individual agreement with each employee specifying the activities and the hours which constitute that employee's flex plan. For the regular faculty the district determines the number of days and number of hours per day which are the equivalent of a full teaching load. Proportional adjustments can be made for those on leave or on partial load.

Although we customarily speak of particular flex days, the Education Code specifies that up to 8.57% of an employee's assigned hours may be used for flex activities and that these can be done at any time during the fiscal year. The district would still have designated flex days when most of the faculty will be involved, but some individuals may do their activities, such as advising students, on other days. While this provision increases the college's flexibility in scheduling, care must be taken that any flex activity does not overlap an employee's assigned hours during the regular school term since ADA is apportioned on both.

At present, college flex plans are approved for one year only and have to be renewed. The reapplication consists of a report describing the previous year's program. A joint faculty and administration planning committee is mandated to evaluate what has been done and recommend any changes. The individual flex agreements are to be certified by management upon satisfactory completion of the flex obligation. These records must be retained for any future audit by state officials.

Let us now examine the most common flex activities in more detail.

Staff Development

The flexible calendar moves staff development from the periphery of institutional life to the center. As revealed by the recent Berman-Weiler study, most community college staff development comes about through individual effort and expense. Institutionally sponsored staff development in community colleges tends to support individual activities through sabbaticals, travel and conference funds, etc. The flexible calendar makes it possible to engage groups of colleagues in collective efforts to achieve large-scale improvement in instructional programs. It allows colleagues to work together on teaching methodologies and skills. Research shows that peer interaction is the most effective path to instructional improvement for experienced classroom teachers.

Among the staff development activities that a flex program makes possible are intensive training programs, group retreats, field experience, serial workshops, and other formats which allow continuous participation with colleagues on a variety of topics. Flex is especially valuable for orientation programs for new faculty and part-time instructors. Some colleges encourage classified staff participation in appropriate workshops.

Curriculum Development

The flexible calendar confronts departments and other instructional units with the challenge of using two available resources -- time and participation -- in a productive manner to improve the curriculum. It forces all faculty to assess real needs and to consider seriously strategies for meeting these needs. Many improvements that might otherwise be dismissed as unrealistic ideals are taken seriously when "not enough time" and "no tangible institutional commitment" are removed as excuses. Working together, both full and part-time faculty can review and revise course outlines. New curriculum can be devloped by visiting other institutions or from experiments begun during the flex time. Large-scale writing assessment programs or reading and writing skills across-the-curriculum are also possible.

Matriculation

The state-mandated matriculation program will most certainly increase demands on staff. Someone must do the testing, assess- ment, advising, and follow-up, and most colleges will be unable to hire enough new staff to meet the need. The flex calendar provides the time necessary for faculty and staff to make matriculation a success. Scheduling flex days just before each term provides time for better student participation.

In the fall of 1984 the faculty and counselors at Contra Costa College used the flex days in August and in January to institute a matriculation process for all new and continuing students taking at least two courses. Students were told about academic requirements and expectations for their majors. For the first time every student was helped in setting a realistic goal and in planning a course schedule. A program of this magnitude would not have been possible without the time and institutional commitment provided by the flex calendar.

Research, Articulation and Instruction

Three other types of activities warrant special mention. Flex time can be used to accomplish needed institutional research. Several years ago, for example, the counseling staff at Consumes River College used some flex days to contact by mail or phone all the students who had dropped out the preceding semester to determine the causes for their decision. The results enabled the school to develop strategies to increase student retention. Articulation has become increasingly important in recent years. Flex provides the time for staff to make extensive visits to four- year colleges or to local high schools to articulate the community college program. One particularly effective articulation device is to invite the staff of local high schools to some particularly exciting flex workshop or presentation. Finally, instruction can be a viable option. Although most colleges prefer to schedule only a few classes on designated flex days, some kinds of specialized instruction or normally low-enrolling courses can work well. Extended field trips for biology classes, intensive workshops in advanced language study, and group research projects have all suc-

ceeded. Furthermore, offering some instructional options adds a variety of choice for both faculty and students.

Calendar Configurations

When a college staff first considers changing the traditional calendar, it will face a bewildering number of options. There are, however, some built-in constraints which will probably limit the choices. If classes are to end before Christmas (which everyone agrees is desirable), then instruction must begin before Labor Day. But if classes begin too early in August, then enrollment is likely to suffer. (Some colleges experimented with an "early start" 175 instructional day calendar and experienced substantial and persistent enrollment loss when classes began in mid-August.) Our district found that beginning instruction a week to 10 days before Labor Day does not seem to affect enrollment negatively. However, there is no guarantee that some loss of students won't occur in the first year of the new calendar.

Another way of dealing with the problem of the fall semester is to consider semesters of slightly unequal lengths. Our district has fall semesters of 81 days, arranged in 17 weeks, and spring semesters of 85 days, arranged in 18 weeks. The anticipated instructional problems did not materialize as most instructors were able to make the necessary internal adjustments. Most districts with flex calendar tend toward some form of the 4- 1-4 configuration with the flex days forming an intersession in January, thus taking advantage of the natural breaks in the school year. The nine flex days in our district's calendar are divided between August and January. Faculty members may be assigned four days before the beginning of the fall term or four days at the beginning of January. They are all assigned for the second week in January when most of the large-scale flex activities take place. Spring term begins after Martin Luther King's Birthday and normally concludes by the end of May.

Different Flex Formats

A district's flex plan will reflect local notions about how much time can be usefully devoted to concentrated improvement activities. Some districts provide only one flex day while others make the full fifteen available.

A flex program will be composed of both required and optional activities. Required activities are those in which every designated employee must participate. These are often departmental or college-wide meetings, specific assignment, etc. Optional activities are those in which the employees may choose to participate: workshops, individual projects, students advising, etc. The ratio between required activities and optional activities will vary from district to district depending on the local institutional culture. Some districts provide tightly scheduled programs that require all to participate. Other districts schedule very few obligatory activities and expect participants to develop individual programs from a range of approved types of activities. Some districts require all flex activities to take place during specified days on campus. Other disticts allow participants to schedule flex activities throughout the year both on and off campus. So far, the Chancellor's office has approved both types of programs, leaving it to the local district to determine the best mix for its needs and to establish accountability.

Politics of Flex

Despite the obvious advantages of the flexible calendar, many will object when it is proposed. Some faculty, particularly in the sciences, believe the loss of any instructional time cannot be justified. Courses with a pre-set number of experiments or modules may have to be adjusted. A program like nursing where the curriculum is in some part determined by an outside agency may have to be exempted from the shorter calendar. On the other hand, much of the opposition to the flexible calendar is simply reluctance to change. Almost every instructor can find ways to offset any minor loss of time. The issue of reforming the calendar usually comes down to balancing institutional concerns against a small group of faculty who believe they must have all the available days for their particular courses. Often these same individuals are most resistant to institutionally sponsored staff development or instructional improvement activities.

Some are concerned that students with small children are adversely affected by any schedule which begins classes before the public schools. However, experience at a number of colleges has shown this has not become a significant problem. Furthermore, all students appreciate the additional time between terms and the earlier finish to the spring term. In the student polls conducted in our district, approval approached 90% for the flexible calendar.

Finally, the public in general and the district governing board in particular have to be convinced that the shorter calendar will ultimately benefit students. College officials have to sell the importance of the alternative activities, such as matriculation and curriculum development. Of course, faculty accountability is the key to public acceptance of the new calendar.

Management of the Flex Program

Managing the flex program involves all the responsibilities of managing the regular instructional program but without many of the conventional understandings that support the regular program. Because the flex program consists of activities "in-lieu-of" regular instruction, many staff members may view it as not encumbering them to the usual standards and modes of institutional behavior. For management this may mean devising and administering a special set of policies and procedures. On some campuses extra efforts may be required to orient staff members to what can be perceived as an additional level of bureaucracy.

It is essential that departments and divisions be involved in the planning and implementing of a college's flex program. In terms of curriculum development, program review, student advising, new faculty orientation, and liaison with part-time faculty, it is at the departmental level that the flexible calendar can be most valuable as a resource. However, it is also at this mid- management level that administering the program may seem most onerous. Distributing and collecting agreement forms, keeping members informed about deadlines and opportunities, reviewing proposals, maintaining accountability all add an additional burden for mid-managers.

There are many tasks associated with making a flex program successful. It must be planned, scheduled and publicized. It must be implemented, evaluated, and reported on. It must be justified and marketed. For a flex program to contribute its full potential, there must be strong faculty participation in all the tasks. Flex cannot be managed from the top down. Rarely has the flexible calendar been adopted as the choice of management.

As is true of all aspects of a flex program, how it is managed can be expected to mirror the real commitment of a college's management to staff development. Where a faculty is used to participating in staff development activities that are well planned and appropriate to the real needs of teachers, flex will reduce the demands on management by providing the gifts of time and opportunity. Where staff development has been minimal or limited to individual choice, flex can mean a new set of demands on management personnel, demands that may not be welcome or appreciated.

Factors for the Success of the Flex Calendar

* Prepare carefully for any calendar change. Make sure there is general understanding of what is to be done and why. It may take a year to plan and win approval for a calendar change.

* Keep the issue of the flex calendar out of the collective bargaining arena, in so far as possible. If it becomes a chit for one side or the other in negotiations, or if it becomes the source of frequent grievances, then the effectiveness of the calendar change is diluted. Sometimes the faculty union will allow the academic senate to handle arrangements.

* In organizing calendar activities, place the principal responsibility with the office of instruction to reinforce the notion that the flex obligation is an integral part of the college operation, not simply an extracurricular activity.

* Most of the actual planning and scheduling should be done at the department level. The flex calendar works best when faculty feel a real stake in its success.

* Involve part-time faculty in flex activities. It helps to bring them into the life of the campus, and arranging development efforts for them serves to focus department energies.
* Don't try to schedule more flex days than your planning process can accommodate. It is better to begin with fewer days and increase the number as the need can be justified.
* Make the individual flex forms simple enough for faculty members to fill out themselves. Don't burden support staff with unnecessary paperwork.
* Encourage widespread involvement in the planning, conducting, and evaluating of flex activities. However, make sure that any steering group is small enough to work effectively.
* Build in extra accountability for individual projects -- activities which take place outside of the regular time and organizational parameters of your college flex plan. Such projects can be very worthwhile, but they also have a high potential for abuse by unsupervised employees. One negative episode, which is publicized, can endanger the whole program.
* Use regular enrollment procedures for faculty signing up for staff development workshops. Don't reinvent the wheel.
* In muti-campus districts, all colleges should adopt the same general calendar, although each may choose to emphasize different activities. Whenever possible, activities like workshops and special speakers should be coordinated throughout the district to create more options.
* Evaluate all aspects of the flex experience. Don't forget to survey student and classified staff reactions.
* Use evaluations to modify the next year's flex plan when necessary. Publicize the evaluation results as well as anecdotal accounts of what works. Keep selling the change to the faculty and the governing board.
* Don't get locked into a single calendar configuration or set of activities. Leave yourself room to change and accommodate new circumstances.
* Do everything possible to encourage variety in the types of activities faculty choose each year. Any activity, no matter how beneficial initially, can lead to boredom and frustration if done repeatedly.

The flexible calendar offers an opportunity to meet the new challenges to community colleges. We can improve our curriculum, help our staff grow, and generally do a better job for our students. But in the final analysis, all a change in the calendar does is provide time for things to happen. The inspiration for and commitment to making change meaningful must come from within the institutional staff.

APPENDIX

California Community Colleges Using the Flexible CalendarWith Name of Contact Person As of February 1988

Butte College - Ernest Matlock
Cabrillo College - Ann Stephenson
Canada College - D. Robert Stiff
College of the Desert - Dorothy Bray
College of the Siskiyous - Yates Greer
College of the Canyons - James Walker
Contra Costa College - Robert Martincich
Cuyamaca College - Samuel Ciccati
DeAnza College - Barbara Reid
Diablo Valley College - Charles Sapper
Foothill College - Bernadine Fong
Fullerton College - Jane Armstrong
Grossmont College - Eve Lill
Irvine Valley College - Terrence Burgess
Los Medanos College - Chet Case
Marin Community College - Stanley Kraczek
Mesa College - Alan Brooks
Miramar College - George Yee
Monterey Peninsula College - David Hopkins
Moorpark College - James Gayle
Rancho Santiago College - Carter Doran
Saddleback Community College - Everett Brewer
San Diego City College - Marvin Burdg
San Mateo College - Lois Callahan
Santa Rosa Junior College - Patricia Miltenberger
Skyline College - Linda Salter
Solano Community College - Ione Elioff
Southwestern College - Thomas Hahn
Taft College - Donald Greene
Ventura College - Eric Nicolet
West Valley College - Dale Johnston

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